

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

September 12, 2003

The President
The White House
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

We are writing to express grave concern over a recent proposal to eliminate disability compensation for thousands of veterans and to inform you that we will do everything in our power to prevent the Senate from approving any such change.

We are contacting you directly because the House Republican leadership one week ago circulated a two-page draft of these legislative provisions to leading veterans organizations and described them as White House documents. The changes would be added to the National Defense Authorization Act for 2004 and would take effect early next year.

The document outlines a radical plan to end disability benefits for thousands of veterans. The plan is said to be necessary to save money that would then be used to offset the cost of our provision in the Senate defense authorization bill to allow disabled veterans to receive their retirement pay and disability compensation concurrently. While we believe it is critical to implement concurrent receipt, we find it outrageous to pit one group of disabled veterans against another.

It is impossible to overstate the magnitude of this proposed change. Any disabled individual whose injuries are not the direct result of the performance of duties, based on their military occupational specialty, would be ineligible for any benefits from the Defense Department or Department of Veterans Affairs. In the VA disability program, we have received estimates that retroactive application of this new standard could deprive 1.5 million veterans – about two-thirds of those now in the program – of all disability benefits. In addition, these disabled veterans would suffer severely diminished access to VA health care, as they would be placed behind the 130,000 veterans who are now on waiting lists at VA hospitals and clinics.

Earlier this week, a joint press release was issued by the Disabled American Veterans, the Paralyzed Veterans of America, AMVETS, Vietnam Veterans of America, and the Military Order of the Purple Heart. The release says, "The House majority leadership has shown callous contempt for the sacrifices of America's defenders." The veterans' groups said the plan amounts to a declaration of war against veterans. Those are strong words, but we couldn't agree more.

We are also concerned about the way the White House and House Republican leaders are pursuing this – with no hearings, no transparency, no opportunity for public comment, no consultation with Democratic leaders, no input from the VA or the Veterans' Affairs committees in Congress. Using veterans disability compensation as a bargaining chip in closed-door

September 12, 2003

Page 2

negotiations on the defense bill is an insult to the millions who have served our nation honorably. They deserve better.

As you know, the Senate has repeatedly passed legislation ending the unfair restriction on concurrent receipt. Again, this year, as part of the National Defense Authorization Act of 2004, the Senate unanimously adopted our amendment allowing eligible veterans to receive both their full military retirement and VA disability concurrently without the current dollar-for-dollar offset. It is time to finally end this outdated and punitive tax on our nation's disabled veterans. It must be done, however, without imposing a greater burden and hardship on those disabled veterans who have already sacrificed so much.

With best wishes, I am

Sincerely,



Tom Daschle
United States Senate



Harry Reid
United States Senate